

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost (A)
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Trinity Church, July 3, 2011

Today's lessons are a study in opposites. There are polarities of viewpoint that are opposite in spirit, but also bound together by a tension that will not allow either to ignore the other. I was intrigued by the way in which the Gospel sets the mood: Jesus says, "To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance, we wailed and you did not mourn."

I tried to find where that neat little bit of poetry came from. It sounds like the children's teasing games that they play in all cultures. Most bible versions print it indented as a poem. In Jesus' own language tradition it would have been an elegant two-line verse; but every indication is that it was Jesus' own unique expression. It also dangles a powerful temptation in front of a preacher on this week-end of national significance! "To what shall I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace, calling to one another, 'We played the tune and you didn't dance. If we can't play the game, it's all your fault.'" Children behave that way. Reasonable adults do not. Polarities. Pin the label wherever you want.

But Jesus' application of his poem was wistfully personal: John came fasting and you said he was crazy. I came eating and drinking and they called me a drunkard. Opposites, polarities, and Jesus is caught between. The Jesus of the Gospels is never resentful, but every now and then he shows frustration because people, even his closest followers, just don't seem to get it. But Jesus is patient. In the course of time the outcomes will prove the truth. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. The proof is always in the pudding. And at the end of it all he says, "

Most of us, probably all of us, consider ourselves decent folk. We have grown up with the understanding that our various desires and interests and compulsions need to be disciplined by the expectations of the people around us. Call it morality or decency or the expectations of the families and communities we live in. As children we learned to call it "being good." A lot of the things that our natural selves wanted to do were called "wrong;" and some things that we didn't particularly want to do, were called "right." And that's pretty much where we are just now.

That's a heavy yoke to shoulder, and a yoke it is. The very purpose of the yoke is to put an outward control on an unwilling ox.

It's a tough thing to learn, and trying always to be "good" can lead to some bad outward behaviors and a lot of inward unhappiness. Is there anyone of mature age who thinks only of good things in the dark hours of the night? Who never lies awake regretting the self-serving things, the unretrievable moment when they have done or said something that was nearly beyond the realm of forgiveness? That is the price of decency. I suppose that there are some who are so comfortable with themselves, who have been so successful in burying the ugly things, that they have not lived through the experience of "wretchedness" – the ache of isolation or some desert-wandering of the spirit. If that's the case, they must have missed something vitally important about being human.

We can try to make up for those failures by becoming one of those people who, as they say, "live for others," to do the decent things and make the necessary sacrifices, to work for good things even to the point of exhaustion; but to do it as a penitential slavery, not altogether successfully disguised by a smiling face.

All of that is the hard and heavy yoke. The Christian way is different. It easier and it is harder. Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Christ says, "I don't want your work, I don't want your money, I don't want your time. I don't want these bits and pieces of you. I want YOU. I want ALL of you. Hand over all of that unruly self and I will give you a new self to take its place. I give you myself and your willful will, will become mine.

Salvation: The fullness of life that Jesus promised to those who placed their faith in him.

